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ABSTRACT

A case study explored the issue of writing at transition, by describing the types of writing tasks a group of four pupils did at the end of Year 6, and at the beginning of Year 7. The range of writing activities has not changed much in the last 20 years, in spite of the introduction of the National Curriculum. The data indicate a mismatch of expectation at transition among teachers, pupils, and parents about the teaching and uses of writing. Concludes: (1) in spite of 10 years of the National Curriculum, there does not appear to be a significant change in the range and types of writing that pupils use in primary and secondary schools; (2) the teaching of genres is patchy and often does not happen, though in some subject areas pupils were taught how to write in a particular genre; and (3) if the concern is to raise standards, there appears to be a need for a more explicit, shared model of writing across the curriculum, and between phases, to enable students to master those genres of writing that will enable them to be successful in different subjects. (Contains 39 references.) (RS)

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by Daniel Tabor

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Literacy at Transition: the Problem of the Developing Writer

by
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Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Sussex, at Brighton, 2-5 September, 1999.

Key words
Curriculum continuity, writing, genre.

NB: School names used in this report are fictitious

Introduction

This is a work in progress paper, based on research conducted in 1997/98 for a PhD in Education at the University of Warwick. In the paper I will outline the context of the research, the research questions, the methods used to conduct the research, and my preliminary findings. It should be emphasised that at this stage my findings are tentative, and may be revised in the process of writing up the thesis.

Writing is important, because it serves as a metaphor for learning ('doing your lessons' usually implies a written activity). Writing is used in school to enhance and further learning, and to assess knowledge; both functions are necessary to a pupil's progress. Studying the differences in the ways writing is taught and used in primary and secondary schools should give us greater understanding of the differences in the teaching and learning styles of the two phases, and the effects of the National Curriculum on primary and secondary education.

In the next two sections I will review some of the key points from the literature on curriculum continuity and transition, and writing at transition, which have generated my research questions.

Context of the Research

Since the Hadow Report (1931) the continuity of education between primary and secondary schools has been a concern of educationalists (eg. Plowden 1967; Bullock 1975; Cockcroft 1982). Much research before the Education Reform Act (1988) concentrated on developing curriculum and pastoral links between phases, and discussions between primary and secondary teachers often focused on curriculum content. Typically, contact between phases was often characterised by mistrust, with teachers in the primary sector feeling that secondary teachers were ignorant of the primary curriculum, while secondary teachers distrusted primary teaching methods and assessments (eg. Stillman and Maychell 1984). Primary heads were often suspicious of surrendering the autonomy of their schools through collaborating closely with secondary schools.

Supported by the Schools' Curriculum Development Committee (SCDC 1988), there were numerous local initiatives to 'bridge the gap' between primary and secondary schools in curriculum terms. My own interest in this area grew out of developing an

extensive programme of joint projects between 1987-1995, in which classes of secondary pupils worked collaboratively with pupils in Years 5 or 6 from our partnership primary schools (Tabor 1991). In general, the pastoral links between primary and secondary schools to ease the transfer of new pupils into the secondary schools were well developed, and research showed that most new pupils adjusted successfully to their new environment (eg. Nisbet and Entwistle 1969; Youngman and Lunzer 1977; Jennings and Hargreaves 1981; Galton 1983; Youngman 1986). The establishment of curriculum continuity between phases was more difficult, because (in general) teachers found it difficult to agree on a shared curriculum. Indeed, the notion of curriculum continuity was itself problematic and difficult to define (Derricott 1985; Castle and Lawrence 1987).

Concern about the issues of continuity and transition often focused on the 'dip' in pupils' achievements as they moved from primary to secondary school. For example, the ORACLE project (Galton et. al. 1983) showed a regression in pupils' learning during the first few months of secondary school, though most pupils had made some progress by the end of the first year. These findings were confirmed by other research (eg. Dodds and Lawrence 1984).

The establishment of the National Curriculum was intended to create a shared framework for the curriculum, that would ensure continuity between the different phases and Key Stages, as well as providing a framework for assessment and regular testing (DES 1989, p.20). Thus, if the introduction of the National Curriculum had been successful, curriculum continuity between phases would occur, and the dip in pupils' achievements at transition would not be significant.

My review of the literature since the introduction of the National Curriculum shows that this is not the case, and that if anything the issues of curriculum continuity have become more difficult. The critical issues are:

1. Lack of continuity in the curriculum between primary and secondary schools. Recent official documents acknowledge this problem (SCAA 1996; SCAA 1997; SCAA 1997a; QCA 1998), and provide a number of suggestions to improve continuity, such as more efficient transfer of records (including test results and teacher assessments) between schools; better use of primary records in the secondary school to inform curriculum planning; and collaborative meetings between primary and secondary teachers to discuss issues of curriculum continuity.

2. From an official point of view, the onus is on teachers to do more: to make sure records are transferred from the primary to the secondary school; to make better use of these records; and to plan lessons in Year 7 in such a way as to build on pupils' previous achievements in Year 6. Any failure to establish continuity is thus largely due to poor or inappropriate use of information already available. Research shows that difficulties in establishing curriculum continuity are far more complex than the government documents suggest (see below).

3. The dip in pupils' achievements at the beginning of Year 7 continues to be a problem in spite of the shared framework provided by the National Curriculum (eg. Sutherland, Johnston and Gardner 1996; Suffolk 1997; Herrington and Doyle 1997; Marshall and Brindley 1998; Schagen and Kerr 1999). There is a question about how representative these studies are, but the fact that they all identify a dip in pupils' achievements at the beginning of Year 7 is significant.

4. The National Curriculum has placed more pressure on teachers to deliver the (overloaded) programmes of study, and to ensure that pupils get good end of key stage results. Curriculum delivery in Year 6 is often distorted by the need to prepare pupils for the Key Stage 2 tests. Secondary teachers remain ignorant, by and large, of the primary curriculum, and distrust (or dismiss) the assessments of their primary colleagues. If information from the primary school does reach the Year 7 teacher in time to inform curriculum planning with the new intake, it is usually discarded in favour of (for example) a 'fresh start' approach for all pupils.

5. More fundamental than the factors identified above are the differences in school culture, and the different approaches to teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools.

   For example, Marshall and Brindley identified the key differences in approach to the teaching of English in primary and secondary schools. For the primary school, English is mainly about language work, whereas at the secondary school it is more literature-based, a distinction which pre-dates the National Curriculum. Discussions between primary and secondary teachers about English thus involve 'translation' between the phases (Marshall and Brindley 1998).

The introduction of the National Curriculum has paradoxically raised awareness among teachers of curriculum continuity between phases, but also made it more difficult to achieve. It is possible that the introduction of the literacy and numeracy initiatives will establish common threads between phases – initiatives which would emphasise the continuity of skills rather than subject content (Schagen and Kerr 1999, p.46).

Writing at Transition

Writing is a cross-curricular skill, as well as having an important role to play within subjects. Differences in the ways writing is taught and used in Years 6 and 7 may therefore contribute both to our understanding of the differences between primary and secondary schools, and to the dip in pupils' achievements at the beginning of Year 7. Research both before and after the introduction of the National Curriculum showed that the writing done in primary and secondary schools was limited to a few types.

As pupils moved from the primary school, Galton and Willcocks found that the nature of the work done in all subjects was similar, monotonous and involved a limited number of writing activities (Galton and Willcocks 1983, p. 102-3; p.131; p.167). In his follow-up study to the ORACLE project, Inside the Primary Classroom: 20 Years

On (1999), Galton concluded that there was some evidence for a decline in literacy standards in the primary classroom compared to twenty years before, as measured by the language tests he used. However it has been pointed out that Galton's research was based on evidence from nineteen classrooms (Campbell and Kyriakides1999), and it runs counter to recent NFER research (Brooks 1998; Foxman 1998) which showed that standards of literacy and numeracy have remained largely the same over the last ten years.

More recent studies have investigated the primary curriculum in detail. For example, Alexander (1992) identified ten generic activities, including writing, which he considered dominated the primary curriculum, regardless of the subject labels used by teachers. However, neither Galton nor Alexander looked closely at what types of writing were taking place, nor how writing was taught in the primary school.

Research in secondary schools over the last twenty years revealed that pupils were engaged in a limited range of writing tasks, e.g. Martin et. al.1976; Brown 1978; Spencer 1983; Medway 1986. The APU report on the writing of fifteen year-olds in England and Wales also showed that pupils were given a very limited 'diet' of writing activities (Gorman et. al. 1987).

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum, pupils' writing at primary and secondary levels has also been a concern. There was little or no evidence in recent OFSTED reports about writing at transition, though there are some data about writing at Key Stages 2 and 3.

For example, the Annual OFSTED Report for 1997/98 described primary achievements in writing as as being weaker than in reading or speaking and listening. Boys' writing showed much greater variation than that of girls, and many boys 'enter secondary schools with seriously weak writing skills' that was bound to impede progress at Key Stage 3 (OFSTED 1999, p.23).

In the OFSTED review Secondary Education 1993-97, writing was considered to be good or better in over half of the schools inspected, but much more guidance was needed to enable pupils to master specific forms or genres of writing, 'by teachers' effective use of models', so that pupils could be more successful in different subjects at secondary school.

Other studies contain little data about the teaching and uses of writing at transition. Some studies have concentrated on the attitudes of secondary teachers to the primary curriculum. For example, secondary English teachers considered the main difference between primary and secondary English was that primary teachers concentrated on skills, while secondary English was more literature-based (Sutherland et. al. 1996. p.141). Many secondary history teachers, in a case study conducted by Huggins and Knight (1997), felt that primary pupils had not learned the writing registers that they would need for Key Stage 3 and GCSE. In general, there are very few references in the literature to continuities or discontinuities in the teaching and uses of writing between Years 6 and 7, particularly in subjects other than English and History.

The Research Questions

From this selective review of the literature, it is apparent that there are gaps in the research on writing and transition, which my research attempted to fill. The research questions are:

1. *How is the process of writing for pupils different in Year 6 compared to Year 7?*

The subsidiary questions are;

a) Is there more copying in Year 6 compared to Year 7, or vice versa?
b) In Year 6, is there more emphasis on neatness, and fewer opportunities for editing and redrafting than in Year 7, or vice versa? Whose emphasis is involved here, i.e. teachers, pupils or both?
c) Are pupils using a narrower range of writing genres in Year 6 compared to Year 7?

2. *How is the teaching about and of writing different in Year 6, compared to Year 7?*

Subsidiary question:

a) Did the Key Stage 2 tests affect the delivery of the writing curriculum in Year 6, and if so, how?

3. *Do pupils see the processes and outcomes of writing differently in Year 6, compared to Year 7? What is the significance of any difference in perception to outcome and attainment?*

Conducting the Research

I decided to use a case study as the main vehicle for the research, because I wanted to look in detail at teaching processes and pupils' experiences and perceptions. I live and work in Bilston, a town of over 20,000 inhabitants in the west of Northamptonshire. The research was conducted at the Fairway Junior School, the adjacent junior school, and my own school, an 11-16 comprehensive with about a thousand pupils. Four pupils were chosen from one of the Year 6 classes: two boys and two girls. They were chosen to represent a span of abilities, as measured by their reading scores.

I tracked the pupils through the end of Year 6, and during the Autumn Term of Year 7. The types of data I collected were:

1. Lesson observation in Years 6 and 7 (including some taped lessons).
2. Interviews with teachers, pupils and parents.
3. Examples of pupils' work, including all the writing they did during a 'snapshot' week at the primary school, and during two 'snapshot' weeks in the first and second halves of the Autumn Term.
4. Policy documents and teacher's planning sheets from the primary school.

5. Writing logs kept by the four target pupils during the Autumn Term, i.e. their first term at the secondary school.
6. A survey of Year 7 teachers, about their attitudes and expectations towards the uses and teaching of writing in Year 7, and the strategies they used.

Insider Research

Conducting insider research presented difficulties and tensions which I had not anticipated. There was the continual pressure on my time, a recurrent theme of my research diary, and the need to fit interviews and lesson observation into a full teaching timetable. There was the conflict between my role as Head of Department, and that of researcher. However self-effacing and unobtrusive I tried to be, as I sat in a corner making notes, I was still perceived by colleagues and pupils as the Head of English. Observing members of my own department teaching was awkward for some, because (inevitably) I was not a neutral figure. On the one hand my position in the school hierarchy gave me status and (some) power, and familiarity with the structures, procedures and personalities within the institutions. On the other hand, it was more difficult for me to maintain objectivity and detachment.

These circumstances raise questions about the validity and reliability of the case study. Clearly the intention was to provide a 'thick' or detailed account of local practices. Collecting different types of data afforded opportunities for triangulation, and (I hoped) would make the study more reliable. Relating my findings to wider policy issues would place my findings in a broader context.

The Findings

The findings at this stage are provisional, and may be revised in the light of further analysis. The main findings to date are:

1. The nature and number of writing tasks at primary and secondary levels are limited to three or four main types, though these are not the same in each snapshot week.

Further points to emerge from the analysis of the snapshot weeks include:

a. 30% of the writing in the primary school consisted of answering questions, and this was a higher proportion than in either of the two secondary snapshot weeks.
b. Labelling a diagram or a picture, or completing a chart or table, accounted for over 30% of the writing activities during the first snapshot week at the secondary school.
c. In the second snapshot week at the secondary school (in December), answering questions, labelling a diagram or picture, or copying constituted 50% of the total writing activities.
d. There was more copying in the secondary school than in the primary school.
e. There were more writing events or activities in the second snapshot week in the secondary school, compared to the other two weeks, which suggested that pupils were locked into a 'typical' diet of writing activities by this stage.

2. *Teachers and pupils have different models of what constitutes 'good' writing, and this is particularly striking at the beginning of secondary school.*

I asked teachers and pupils what they understood by 'good' writing; at the secondary school I asked heads of Department what constituted good writing in their subject. In the Year 6 class, the teacher I worked with looked for:

a. content;
b. good vocabulary;
c. sentence structure;
d. the main idea of the lesson;
e. use of paragraphing.

Thus skills tended to be emphasised, and this was shown in the responses of the target pupils, who mentioned spelling and punctuation most frequently. One of the girls referred to the use of expression and detail, depending on whether the writing was a story or a letter, and two of the other pupils mentioned stories, which also reflected the emphasis on narrative in Year 6.

As the pupils moved from primary to secondary school they encountered different models of what constituted 'good' writing, that were specific to different subject areas, taught by different teachers. Pupils in Year 7 have to adjust to the different writing demands of these subjects.

For example, the Head of Geography told his pupils, 'What applies to Geography is what I tell you, and even if geographical sentences are short and blunt and don't sound very nice they might be bad for English, but they are good for Geography.' In other words, the emphasis was on concision. A couple of other examples will illustrate how the writing demands of subjects differed.

In Maths, the notion of good writing included:

a. writing that is clearly understood;
b. the use of short, precise sentences;
c. crisp explanations;
d. the use of narrative to supply a running commentary of the thoughts of the student as s/he develops an idea (particularly important at GCSE).
e. writing that is broken up with diagrams, photos and images 'to stimulate, intrigue and offer pause for thought' (Head of Maths).

In History, the main feature of good writing were:

a. factual accuracy;
b. use of correct terminology;
c. writing that was relevant to producing a well-structured essay.

What strategies were used to teach pupils to write appropriately for a given subject? I observed very little direct teaching of genre. For example, in English, I observed two Year 7 classes where pupils were editing and redrafting stories (in fact correcting spelling and punctuation in most cases, and making neat copies). The pupils were not taught to edit and redraft; it was assumed that they knew what to do, and correcting spelling and punctuation was familiar from primary school.

In History I observed the direct teaching of essay writing to Year 7 pupils. The pupils were given 'true' and 'false' cards about why the Normans won the Battle of Hastings, and had to sort out the 'true' cards. These were used as the structure for the essay, each 'true' card serving as the start of a discrete paragraph. The function and writing of paragraphs was thus part of teaching the pupils to write an argumentative essay.

3. There was a mismatch between the expectations of teachers, pupils and parents in Year 6 about writing at the secondary school, and what writing skills Year 7 teachers thought new pupils were capable of.

I interviewed parents, pupils and their Year 6 teacher about their expectation of how writing would be different at the secondary school. I regard writing as a social practice, so it was important to understand the experiences and attitudes to writing in the home. I interviewed six adults, and in general there was an expectation that writing at the secondary school would involve more difficulty, and opportunities for progress. This was expressed in terms of a different or higher 'level' of writing task. The importance of neat handwriting and correct spelling and punctuation was also emphasised.

The Year 6 teacher was concerned with skills and language work, eg. handwriting and accuracy, and teaching the writing of narrative. He was unclear about the writing demands of the secondary school, but was concerned that his pupils would have a 'good basis' in terms of curriculum knowledge and language skills that would enable them to be successful in Year 7. The pupils emphasised the importance of technical skills, but had little sense of what the writing demands in Year 7 might be.

From the survey I conducted with secondary teachers of Year 7 in my school, and the other secondary school in Bilston, teachers had low expectations of the writing skills that new pupils possessed at the beginning of Year 7. The main writing skills they were expected to have were the ability to:

a. write in sentences;
b. use capital letters and full stops;
c. copy accurately;
d. present their work neatly.

When the secondary teachers were asked what types of writing Year 7 pupils did most frequently in their lessons, five categories (out of sixteen) were mentioned most frequently:

a. answer questions;
b. copy off the blackboard;
c. brainstorm ideas;
d. label a chart or graph;
e. write a summary.

Tasks a-e are usually short writing tasks, and do not involve extended writing. Hence the teaching of specific genres is (by and large) less important than the widespread use of the forms of writing identified through the survey. Further research will be necessary to establish whether, for example, answering questions was used mainly to

develop pupils' understanding and knowledge, or whether it was used to assess what the pupils had learned.

The pupils kept writing logs during the Autumn Term of Year 7, recording the writing tasks they did in their lessons. The main categories which they explicitly identified were copying and answering questions. At present I am comparing their writing logs with examples of their writing, to establish what match exists between their perceptions, and the evidence in their exercise books.

4. There appear to be two implicit models that are used to conceptualise writing by teachers at primary and secondary levels.

There is the model used at both primary and secondary levels which is mainly concerned with basic skills, such as writing in sentences, spelling, the correct use of capital letters and full stops.

There is a second or 'higher' model or level which is about the genres appropriate for learning and writing in specific subjects. From my preliminary analysis of the data, the direct teaching and use of genres occurs infrequently in both phases, or it is restricted to one or two types, eg. the emphasis on narrative in Year 6 (in part determined by the demands of the Key Stage 2 tests).

Answering the Research Questions

Though my analysis of the data is at a preliminary stage, a tentative answer can be given to some of the research questions.

1.How is the process of writing different for pupils in Year 6 compared to Year 7?

It would appear that at primary level there was more emphasis on improving technical skills and handwriting, and developing pupils' ability to write narrative. At secondary level pupils did more copying than at primary school. In both phases, answering questions, labelling pictures and diagrams, and completing charts and tables occurred frequently. There was more emphasis on neatness at the primary school, particularly where handwriting was concerned.

2. Is the teaching of writing different in Year 6, compared to Year 7?

My tentative answer to this question is that the teaching of technical skills is more important in Year 6 than in Year 7, but the explicit teaching of genres is patchy in both phases.

The Key Stage 2 tests have had an effect on the delivery of the Year 6 curriculum, in particular the emphasis on teaching pupils to write narrative.

3. Do pupils see the processes and outcomes of writing differently in Year 6, compared to Year 7?

It was difficult for pupils to separate the writing component from the different learning environment of the secondary school, with different subject teachers, homework, etc. At the beginning of the Autumn Term they were struck by the material differences, eg. in primary school they used pencils for drafting, and fountain

pens for neat work, and best work was often written up on plain paper (with guidelines). At secondary school they could use biros, and there was not so much emphasis on neatness.

Conclusion

This is a preliminary analysis of my data, and I may change my conclusions by the end of the thesis. However, there are a few provisional conclusions I can draw:

1. In spite of ten years of the National Curriculum, there does not appear to be a significant change in the range and types of writing that pupils use in primary and secondary schools, compared to ten or twenty years ago. The differences in the writing processes and experiences of pupils are mainly a result of the different teaching and learning environments of the primary and secondary schools, and the ways of working which teachers are used to.
2. The teaching of genres is patchy and often does not happen, though in some subject areas (eg. In my school History was a clear example) pupils were taught how to write in a particular genre.
3. If our concern is to raise standards, there appears to be a need for a more explicit, shared model of writing across the curriculum, and between phases, to enable students to master those genres of writing that will enable them to be successful in different subjects.

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